

# Australia's east coast hit by devastating storms

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Intense storms, which began in Queensland on June 4 and swept south along Australia's east coast over the next three days, killed five people, flooded hundreds of homes and destroyed basic infrastructure in parts of Queensland, New South Wales (NSW), the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania.

Major cities impacted included Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra and Launceston with thousands advised to evacuate their homes. At least, five bodies—three in NSW and one each in Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory—have been found by search and rescue officers. Three people are missing, believed to have been killed.

While the total cost of damage caused to residences, farming and public infrastructure, including roads and bridges, has not been released it is expected to be well over \$100 million.

Many farms—from banana plantations to dairy, beef and sheep properties—suffered major damage. One banana grower in northern NSW, for example, lost 70 percent of his crop. Flooding has also killed hundreds of livestock in NSW and Tasmania.

In Brisbane, the Queensland capital, dozens of roads were closed due to the heavy rain. Canberra and nearby towns recorded their wettest June day on record while parts of NSW experienced over 400mm of rain. In Sydney, winds were over 100km/hour, causing havoc on airport runways and to the city's transport systems. Waves, recorded at over 12 metres high, caused severe damage to several coastal suburbs.

In Tasmania, over a hundred roads were blocked by flooding and damaged bridges. The state-owned TasPorts reported that freight and cruise vessels' shipping lanes were affected by debris and damaged boats in rivers.

The state's second largest city, Launceston, was

placed on high alert with warnings that flooding could reach one-in-100-year levels. State emergency services in NSW and Tasmania called on thousands of residents to leave areas at risk. For many this was simply impossible with roads subject to flooding, power outages and many public transport systems suspended.

Emergency response units were spread thin across the affected areas with hundreds of flood victims rescued by under-resourced services. NSW State Emergency Services Commissioner Phil Campbell said that call rates were at "around 50 to 100 per hour" during and in the aftermath of the storm on June 5.

One of the areas hit hardest in NSW was Collaroy, on Sydney's northern beaches, where heavy seas eroded up to 50 metres of beachfront and damaged numerous homes. Local residents have been calling for a protective sea wall for several years. NSW Liberal Party Premier Mike Baird told the media that if a sea wall was to be built, residents would have to "make a contribution."

In a federal election campaign dominated by widespread disaffection and hostility to the entire political establishment, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Labor opposition leader Bill Shorten seized the opportunity to express sympathy for the victims of the storms. However, successive Coalition and Labor governments, state and federal, are responsible for the lack of emergency services and preventative measures as well as the overall rundown of infrastructure that exacerbates the impact of such disasters.

Baird joined Turnbull on a visit to storm-ravaged Picton, 80 kilometres south-west of Sydney and voiced concern for those affected. But government disaster relief for storm victims is a pittance. Under joint federal and state Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery

Arrangements those who have lost their homes and belongings will only receive \$200 per adult and \$100 per child or a total of no more than \$750 per family.

Baird, Turnbull and Shorten have fostered the illusion that the insurance companies can be pressed to assist the victims. Echoing these sentiments, Michael Keenan, the federal justice minister, told ABC radio on Wednesday: “The government would expect the insurance companies will fulfil their obligation to people.”

The insurance companies have made clear, however, that damage caused by storm surges and coastal flooding was frequently not covered by insurance. Insurance Council of Australia spokesman Campbell Fuller told the media that “many insurers don’t cover actions of the sea. It’s a very common exclusion.”

Insurance Australia Group (IAG), the country’s largest insurer, said it had 10,000 of the over 19,000 claims already lodged. The company’s share prices increased this week when it announced its market share in Tasmania was low and that other storm damage claims would not heavily impact on the company’s bottom line.

Last weekend’s storm occurred when a low-pressure trough developed into an intense low-pressure system known as an “east coast low.” While these occur several times every year the severity of the June 4–6 storms was produced by the coupling of the east coast low with a king tide. King tides (unusually high tides) are predictable events that arise naturally and periodically with highest instances being recorded both around Christmas and in the cooler winter months of June–August.

Ian Turner, Water Research Laboratory director at the University of NSW, told the media that the storms were “a harbinger of what’s to come.” Climate change, he said, “is not only raising the oceans and threatening foreshores, but making our coastlines much more vulnerable to storm damage. What are king high tides today will be the norm within decades.”

Turner warned that although the Water Research Laboratory had collected valuable data on “coastal variability” over many decades it only applied to “a 500 km stretch of southeastern Australia.”

“There are very different coasts across the country exposed to very different conditions, and we just don’t have the observational data we need to make

predictions with any great confidence... For that, we need a national approach.”

But even this attitude is limited. The problem of climate change is global by its very nature. Without internationally coordinated efforts to curb the problem, nothing can be resolved. And the problem, at its core, is the capitalist profit-system, where only the most profitable endeavours are pursued.

Under the current system, humanity is coming face-to-face with a future in which the events of last weekend on Australia’s east coast will become more commonplace, affect more lives and put our future existence on this planet at risk.

*The author also recommends:*

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